

## Urgent or important? A time management tool

*“The more important an item, the less likely it is urgent, and the more urgent an item, the less likely it is important.” Dwight Eisenhower*

### The big idea

Probably one of the most common complaints that people make in relation to their work is that there is not enough time in the day. Managing your time well means being effective as well as efficient: there is no point having endless ‘to do’ lists if your main focus is on the urgent and not the important. The Eisenhower approach to time management is a value-based approach, which encourages you to move away from everyday ‘fire fighting’ to growing your business. In case the distinction is not clear:

- Important activities produce an outcome that helps you achieve your goals
- Urgent activities demand your immediate attention and are more likely to help achieve someone else’s goals. An urgent activity is like a screaming child: it demands attention because the consequences of not dealing with it are immediate

Many of the problems associated with a full agenda result from our inability to discern what is urgent from what is important. Building on Eisenhower’s approach, David Covey (1990) introduced the Urgent/Important Matrix in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

### Purpose

Using the matrix encourages you to stop and think carefully about your time and your priorities. It is aimed at helping you to do the right things right, at the right time.

### The tool

There are five simple steps to creating your urgent/important matrix:

1. List all your issues and tasks. Try to include all the things you have to do no matter how trivial
2. Now go back to your list and rank each item in terms of how important it is. You can use a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being low and 5 being high). You are ranking in terms of importance, those things that help you meet your goals
3. Think about the absolute deadlines for each of the activities and then rank them in terms of urgency
4. You are now ready to map them on the matrix (see Figure 1)

Figure 1 Urgent/important matrix

|                |             |   |  |
|----------------|-------------|---|--|
| <b>Urgency</b> | <b>High</b> | If it is a small activity then do it quickly; if it is a large activity postpone or drop it.<br><br>These are interruptions | Assuming you are the only one who can do this, do it now!<br><br>These are critical activities |
|                | <b>Low</b>  | If it's not fun, don't do it!<br><br>These are distractions   | Don't let this become urgent.<br><br>These are important goals                                 |
|                |             | <b>Low</b>  | <b>High</b>  |
|                |             | <b>Importance</b>   |  |

## Strategies for the different quadrants

**Urgent and important:** there are two things that fall into this category – those that were unforeseen and those you have left to the last minute. These can be addressed by:

- Planning ahead and being aware of procrastination
- Planning in some time to allow you flexibility to deal with the unforeseen
- Using the matrix to gauge what can be postponed if you have to deal with a crisis
- If you do get caught out, review what happened and be prepared for something similar in future

**Urgent and not important:** these are the things that get in the way of achieving your goals and can be addressed by:

- Rescheduling or delegating
- Gently saying ‘no’ to others or encouraging them to solve the issue themselves
- Scheduling times when it is OK to be interrupted

**Not urgent but important:** these are the aspects that can help you achieve your goals and aspirations. In dealing with these:

- Make sure you leave enough time to do them properly so they don’t become urgent
- Leave enough time to deal with unforeseen problems that might arise as you complete these tasks

**Not urgent and not important:** these are simply distractions and should be treated accordingly. Either ignore them or politely say ‘no’ if they are coming from other people.

## Take the next step

Having completed the matrix, think about your relationship to your distractions and interruptions. Are there any patterns? How often do they involve other people? How often do you find yourself working to a last-minute deadline? Keep a diary of how you use your time in a week (include both work and home). How might you reorganise your time as a result of your findings?

## Top tips

- Be aware of how much you distract yourself and how much you let others distract you
- Be realistic when you are estimating the likely time needed for specific tasks. It generally takes longer than most people allow
- If you are clear with others about your time boundaries, they will come to respect your focus on achieving your goals

## References

Covey, D. (1990). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change. Restoring the Character Ethic.* New York: Fireside.

Hogan, K. (2010). *The 168 Hour Week: Living Life Your Way.* Minnesota, USA: Network 3000 Publishing.